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THAI-US RELATIONS TAKE ANOTHER THUMPING

Thai government leaders have voiced their strongest criticism of the US in several years over what they believe to be US interference with a pending sale of 20,000 tons of Thai rice to South Vietnam. Some cabinet officials assert that Saigon withdrew from the negotiations on US "orders," and they view the substitution of a delivery of US rice to Saigon as clear evidence of US chicanery. Foreign Minister Thanat has led the attack, implying to the US ambassador that Washington's action was deliberately cutthroat and labeling as specious the ambassador's explanations to the contrary.

Although the Thai leaders in a more halcyon period might have treated the incident as an isolated one, it has come at a time when they are deeply troubled over the nature of their relations with the US. Already apprehensive over what they believe to be a weakening in the US commitment to Thailand's security and dismayed over criticism in the US of Thailand's role in the Vietnam war, the Thai are reacting strongly to each instance in which Washington appears to be downgrading Thai interests.

Bangkok is apparently prepared to pursue the rice issue forcefully in an effort to regain an appearance of equality in its dealings with the US. Although the Thai have been careful in the past to mute their differences with the US, both Thanat and Prime Minister Thanom have made the issue a central theme in recent press conferences. Thanom also said his government plans to put the controversy on the top of its list of things to discuss during Vice President Agnew's coming visit to Bangkok. Thanat has already warned the US ambassador that a formal protest might be made if Washington is not "responsive" to his strong verbal protest.

Although the Thai can be expected to press hard for greater US recognition of Thai interests, for instance in the rice trade, they are aware of the limited leverage they can apply. The dispute over the rice contract will probably not go much beyond protests, but the Thai could complicate other matters of mutual concern, such as the determination of who has criminal jurisdiction in cases involving US personnel in Thailand. (CONFIDENTIAL NO FOREIGN DISSEM)